

Home

BOLDRE STILL AND BOLDRE (May 2014)



The Vicarage's new deer-proof vegetable garden

*The Reverend Canon Andrew Neaum became the “House for Duty” Anglican priest of the lovely Boldre Benefice in August 2013. The Vicarage in which he and Diana live is on the edge of the New Forest, a couple of miles north of Lymington in Hampshire. He is old fashioned enough a priest to visit his flock in their homes, but “house for duty” clergy are supposed to work only two days a week and Sundays, which means visiting everyone in the parish takes a long time. The following are the **May 2014** weekly ruminations, aired prejudices and footling observations that in the weekly pew sheet augment his visits and help keep folk in touch week in and week out. Earlier articles are available from the Article Page on this Website: <http://www.andrewneaum.com/articles.htm>*

(39) “This and That” - 25 May, 2014

Food and parsoning go together. We clergy have food and drink pressed upon us on many a parish visit and nearly all significant parish events involve a meal of one sort or another.

On a regular monthly visit to a remote cottage on the Island of St Helena I once unadvisedly showed my appreciation of pumpkin fritters. Thereafter I was expected to relish at least half a dozen of the cold and greasy brutes every time I visited. A fitting penalty for the hypocrisy of my pretended appreciation. So unappetising were they that at 10.30 in the morning I compounded hypocrisy with deceit and discreetly secreted three or four in my pocket to fling far into the ubiquitous flax on my walk home.

An elderly priest of my acquaintance, noted for helping himself to a more than generous portion of everything available at parish meals, was once observed piling the petals from a decorative bowl of pot pourri onto his plate. He imagined them to be some new and exotic delicacy. A spoil-sport alerted him to the error before we had the chance to see if he wuffled his way through them with the gusto of a health freak at the muesli.

Bishops too have a way with food. Sitting opposite the Bishop of Ballarat at a “Bishop in Council” luncheon once I was inspired to write the following verse:

*From living rich on food and wine
that purple prelates' palates please,
On pork terrine, poached salmon, truffles,
caviar, foie gras, French cheese;
Our bishop to reality returned
last month from overseas!
At Bishop's Council lunch he faced
a pie, tomato sauce and peas!*

*He sat full face to me, sad faced
to face a soggy, faceless pie.
He rolled his eyes and pursed his lips
and spooned on sauce, and gave a sigh.
He poked the thing, which promptly spilled
its gristly gravy guts, to die,
Surrounded by the saucy peas,
to eat the which he had a try.*

*But memories of truffles, salmon,
camembert and stilton cheese,
Of Cambridge, Ely, London, Gloucester
(Ballarat's antitheses)
All caused him sadly to retire,
the pie uneaten (and the peas),
Regretting exile here to bitter
Ballarat antipodes.*

Unadulterated Tripe

My first parish, in Africa had been left a fifteenth part of a third share in a local gold mine. This meant that we were rich and so able to build a new church for a poor and predominantly black congregation in our country town. To celebrate its consecration we were invited to a feast. One of the churchwardens offered me a huge piece of unwashed tripe from the whole spitted oxen. When I declined with an invisible shudder, he took it in both hands and sank his teeth into its juicy, dirty greenness with a joy and gusto that made me wonder if I had been right to reject it.

The same churchwarden asked us to a meal at his house some months later. It was a traditional and lovely African meal - the meat dish and boiled kale in two common bowls, and the staple "sadza" (a savoury stiff porridge made from ground maize) in

another. Towards its end the meal suddenly developed an almost Eucharistic significance. As we ate happily together, blacks and whites, the guerrilla war that was to turn Rhodesia into Zimbabwe was raging. There was an evening curfew in the area and to visit remote parts of my parish I had to travel in armed convoy with a sub-machine gun beside me. Inevitably the conversation turned to the war and our experience of it. Almost incidentally we learned that our host had been captured and imprisoned by guerrillas, that his wife had had her teeth knocked out by a rifle butt, that their families lived in extremely dangerous situations. The meal, like the Eucharist, suddenly and poignantly revealed to us the cost and pain and suffering of innocence, goodness and redemption.

(38) "This and That" - 18 May, 2014

I rather like the idea of composing my own funeral oration. How truthful would I dare to be?

Autobiography can be less honest than biography. Self-regard and pride too often lead to a selectivity with the facts and with the truth about one's personality and life. A funeral oration written by oneself would surely suffer from the such faults.

Funeral orations and eulogies left to bereaved, grieving and sometimes guilt-ridden loved-ones, however, are often blighted by too close an adherence to the principle *de mortuis nihil nisi bonum* (speak no ill of the dead). Those eulogised can be all but unrecognisable for who they really were.

I like to think that even in my self-love I would be far harder and more truthful about myself than anyone who loved me half as much.

Someone suggested recently that it is far preferable at a funeral to celebrate the life of a deceased loved one than to mourn his or her demise. I do not entirely agree. Grief and devastation need to be acknowledged not ignored. Merely to celebrate a life that is now past, done for and finished can be evasive, a cop out, a cowardly refusal to face the devastating reality and totality of loss. I dislike histrionics, choked blubbing and emotional incontinence at funerals, but fully satisfying ceremonies tell the whole story not just part of it. They mourn as well as celebrate.

Roger McGough makes the point with his customary panache and verve in this poem:

I Am Not Sleeping

*I don't want any of that
"We're gathered here today
to celebrate his life, not mourn his passing."
Oh yes you are. Get one thing straight,
you're not here to celebrate
but to mourn until it hurts.
I want wailing and gnashing of teeth.
I want sobs, and I want them
uncontrollable. I want women
flinging themselves on the coffin
and I want them inconsolable.*

*Don't dwell on my past but on your future.
For what you see is what you'll be
and sooner than you think.
So get weeping. Fill yourselves with dread.
For I am not sleeping. I am dead.*

One of my many favourite, relatively minor, poets is John Heath-Stubbs. He died in 2006 and for much of his life was totally blind. In his comparative youth he wrote an Epitaph on himself which I love. It begins as follows:

*Mr Heath-Stubbs as you must understand
Came of a gentleman's family out of Staffordshire
Of as good blood as any in England
But he was wall-eyed and his legs too spare.*

*His elbows and finger-joints could bend more ways than one
And in frosty weather would creak audibly
As to delight his friends he would give demonstration
Which he might have done in public for a small fee.*

My favourite stanza is as applicable to me and my friends when we were at university as it was to him:

*Orthodox in beliefs as following the English Church
Barring some heresies he would have for recreation
Yet too often left these sound principles (I am told) in the lurch
Being troubled with idleness, lechery, pride and dissipation.*

The final stanza:

*Now having outlived his friends and most of his reputation
He is content to take his rest under these stones and grass
Not expecting but hoping that the Resurrection
Will not catch him unawares whenever it takes place.*

(37) "This and That" - 11 May, 2014

Today is "Good Shepherd Sunday". I know a thing or two about sheep, as you might well discover if you listen to today's sermon.

My first Australian parish was centred as on the rural hamlet of Skipton in the Western Districts of Victoria. It was sheep country par excellence and an enjoyable place to live. One of my best parishioners ran seventeen thousand teen thousand merinos on his property. We balanced the parish church's books by digging bags of sheep manure from under local shearing sheds and then selling them to gardeners in Melbourne. It was good, dirty fun. Here in Boldre the remedy for our budgeted deficit



*An Australian Shearing Shed
© Andrew Chapman*

of £18,000 this year might well lie in a similar resort to muck raking, muck bagging and muck salesmanship.

I celebrated our efforts in Skipton Australia with a piece of light verse, as follows:

IN PRAISE OF MANURE

Under a shearing shed shovelling muck,
Crouching and grunting and down on his luck,
An Anglican Rector discovered the way
To keep cash-hungry bishop and diocese at bay.

The offertory plate for each Sunday was light,
But he didn't despair at the pitiful sight,
Or rant and harangue his faithful few,
He flopped to his knees, but not in a pew.

Under a shed he got down to his praying,
In effortful action not blahing and braying,
And so there were filled lots of offertory sacks,
Pile upon pile, a great mountain of stacks.

This wasn't accomplished completely alone,
He didn't perspire and beseech on his own.
Parishioners too came to kneel in the dung,
To pray with their muscle as well as their tongue.

In Carngham they did it without their good Rector,
Hundreds of sacks from this hard-working sector,
And in Wallinduc's rain and in Wallinduc's mud,
The hand of Sue Robertson split and poured blood,

But still she dug on, with the hard working Netta,
Inspiring the men to do better and better.
So Christ Church Skipton was solvent on dung
And happy am I dung's praise to have sung.

The stuff has its merits is far from obscene,
Its smell is not noxious, though pungent its clean,
How well it dissolves a parish's debts
And eases a Rector's worries and frets.

All praise then for muck, the most wonderful stuff,
A church in the country just can't get enough.
As roses and lilies require it to thrive
So too do our churches to keep them alive.

(36) “This and That” - 4 May, 2014

In 1980 a meal took an average of 60 minutes to prepare; in 1990 it was 45 minutes; by 2012 it had fallen to 34 minutes. Apparently most people do not cook at all, subsisting on sandwiches or ready-made meals from supermarkets. As a nation we eat 6.4 billion sandwiches a year, 1.6 billion ready-made meals as well as 1.1 billion pizzas. We are spending less and less time in the kitchen.

Self-important secularists

I, on the other hand, spend more and more time there. The kitchen is my favourite room. To prepare a curry without using ready-made pastes and spice-mixes is a time consuming, thoroughly absorbing and therapeutically relaxing business. Especially now that Lent has ended and there can be a glass of wine to hand.

It is invigorating to swim against the tide. All of us who are emphatically Christian in our post-Christian society do so willy nilly. We should all of us add a decibel or two to every “Amen” we say this Sunday. It would be a civilized way of cocking a snook at the fifty, self-important secularists who took issue with David Cameron for calling England a Christian country. What a fuss about so very little. Ho hum.

Big regrets

There are two popular songs sometimes asked for at funerals about which I have serious misgivings.

The first is “I did it my way”. Its sentiments, at first sight, can appear attractively defiant in the face of the slings and arrows of life’s arbitrariness. At second and third sight they are unattractively arrogant, godless and even dangerous. “My way” and “what I want” usually conflict with what others want and with what is right, good and God’s way. Human history is bloody testimony enough to that. Every monstrous or tin-pot tyrant does it “their way” with disastrous results.

The second song is “Non, je ne regrette rien”. I love Edith Piaf and like the song, but in the context of funerals it leaves me uneasy. For again, although its sentiments at first sight appear attractively defiant in the face of the slings and arrows of life’s arbitrariness, they are simply untrue as expressive of a whole human life.

None of us dies without regrets. All of us surely are sorry for some roads not taken, some opportunities missed, for things left unsaid and for love unexpressed, refused or denied. To say that we regret nothing is to lie.

Little regrets

These ponderous thoughts had very small beginnings. They came to me as Diana and I were saying matins last Friday morning. We use the Book of Common Prayer and every psalm in that book has a title that I fondly mutter before the psalm’s recitation. The title comprises the psalm’s first few words in Latin and several are still in common currency. Psalm 51 is Miserere (hence Allegri’s famous “Miserere”) and Psalm 130 is De Profundis (hence Oscar Wilde’s famous letter from Reading Gaol).

I loved these Latin titles as a child and still do. Yet modern liturgists, kill-joy rationalists that they are, have ditched them all as irrelevant and useless. Bah! How I regret their loss. How I love to resist that loss every morning by savouring them when saying matins.

Another and not dissimilar little regret came with the introduction of metrication and the consigning of the “rod, pole or perch”, the old penny, shilling, florin and half crown to the dustbin. I applaud the forces of populist reaction that have so far saved us pints of beer, miles of road, and inches of height.

Long live the irrelevant, bizarre, odd, eccentric and useless. They help make life pleasingly illogical, fascinating and lovely.

[Home](#)